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ABSTRACT

The digest presents an overview of program evaluation in gifted and talented education. Reasons for program evaluation are offered, including the need to base decision making on valid and reliable data and the demands of accountability. Eight purposes of program evaluation are briefly considered: (1) documentation of the need for a program; (2) documentation of the case for a particular approach; (3) documentation of the feasibility of a program; (4) documentation of program implementation; (5) identification of program strengths and weaknesses; (6) provision of data for in-progress revisions of the program; (7) documentation of the results or impacts of the program; and (8) explanation and description of the program to interested and uninformed audiences. Steps in developing effective evaluation designs are traced, including basic steps of planning and identifying both decision makers and key evaluation questions. Two final sections address selection of evaluation instruments and reporting of findings. (CL)

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DIGEST

EVALUATION OF PROGRAMS FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

Why Do We Need to Evaluate Programs for the Gifted and Talented?

As commitment to providing programs for the gifted and talented has increased, there has been a proliferation of identification procedures and instruments, programming alternatives, curricular options, and teaching strategies which claim to serve the needs of this group. In order to make reasoned judgments about the continuation of particular practices, it is crucial that we collect valid and reliable data. Too often, those ideas which are theoretically sound or seem reasonable when described in workshops, articles, or textbooks turn out to be inappropriate in specific situations or not to meet the needs of particular gifted and talented students. The positive and negative effects of various program features must be evaluated in order to determine whether plans for programs are reasonable, can be implemented as described, and yield the expected results.

Accountability also demands evaluation. As competition for the educational dollar becomes more intense, programs for the gifted and talented will be scrutinized more carefully. It will not be possible to rely on conjecture or feelings to persuade public agencies to commit funds for gifted and talented students. Administrators, school boards, and the public will demand valid evidence of the effectiveness of programs for developing the potential of these students.

What Specific Purposes Can Program Evaluation Serve?

- *Documentation of the need for a program.* Why implement this program in the first place? Obviously there are needs for programs for the gifted, but we must document that the proposed program will actually serve the needs of the population identified and that existing programs do not already meet those needs.
- *Documentation of the case for a particular approach.* What makes us believe that a particular approach (acceleration, the Enrichment Triad Model, etc.) is the most appropriate one at this time and in this situation? Addressing and answering these questions during the planning stages of program development and program evaluation will help prevent the error of omission and commission in planning—errors that could result in the failure of the program to meet its goals.
- *Documentation of the feasibility of a program.* Is it feasible to expect all classroom teachers will have the skills to implement a cluster-group program when there is no provision for staff development? A program evaluation can help identify those situations in which the program simply does not have the resources or other capability to deliver the instruction as described.
- *Documentation of program implementation.* A major function of a complete program evaluation is documenting whether the program is being implemented as intended or even being implemented at all. Are classroom teachers really compacting the curriculum for the gifted student? Are selection committees really using multiple criteria for identification? It is unlikely that selected outcomes will be achieved if the program designed to achieve those outcomes is not in place.
- *Identification of program strengths and weaknesses.* When program evaluation is solely a process of judging whether or not the program has achieved its goals, it fails to help the program administrator and staff identify those aspects of the program which contributed to or interfered with effective program implementation.
- *Provision of data for in-progress revisions of the program.* As part of program evaluation it is important to ask: What are those aspects of the program that need to be changed and what are some of the alternatives to consider?
- *Documentation of the results or impacts of the program.* This traditional function of program evaluation is one which focuses on outcome variables and may result in the examination of student outcomes, the effect of the program on the school, teachers, other students, etc.
- *Explanation and description of the program to interested and uninformed audiences.* One important outcome of program evaluation is to provide documentation of the resources, activities, and impacts/results of the program to funding agents, potential adopters of a program, parents, administrators, etc.

How Can I Develop an Effective Evaluation Design?

- *Begin at the beginning.* Planning for evaluation should begin at the same time as planning for the program itself. Evaluations as afterthoughts, used in an attempt to rescue a floundering program, are usually too little and too late. One of the greatest advantages of program evaluation is that the first step requires a thorough description of the program (its major components, the resources necessary, the activities, and the anticipated outcomes of the program). Information on the first step of describing

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a program is available in basic resources such as Renzulli (1975) or Yavorsky (1984).

- *Identify decision makers.* Evaluation designs should identify the administrative decision makers who can and will use the evaluation data to improve program functioning. It is important that the evaluators and decision makers collaborate in the next step in the process—identifying the key evaluation questions.

- *Identify key evaluation questions.* This step presumes that you have done a careful job of describing your program and the specific goals and objectives of the program. Now you must determine which components must be closely examined. A guide to the selection is to ask questions such as: Is this an area of central importance to the functioning of the program? Is this area potentially problematic? Is this an area of direct concern to an external evaluation audience? Is this an area of concern to internal evaluation audiences? Is information needed soon? (Yavorsky, 1984). It is certainly important to identify areas of evaluation concern and questions relating to student achievement, but it is equally important to identify areas of concern such as the effect of removing a child from the classroom on self-concept (of the gifted child and other children), impact on school and community, communication, attitudes, finances, and so forth.

- *Select an evaluation strategy.* Traditional evaluation designs were oriented toward the use of research designs and methodologies. Current evaluation literature suggests that alternatives including quasi-experimental design and qualitative assessments are often far more appropriate for evaluating nontraditional programs. (Patton, 1981; Smith, 1981; Callahan, 1983).

- *Identify sources of information.* Once basic concerns and evaluation strategies have been identified, it is important to identify reliable and valid sources of information and construct a timetable for data collection. It is especially important that control groups be identified very early if they are a part of the evaluation design.

How Can I Select Evaluation Instruments Which Will Meet the Needs of My Program?

After determining the best sources of information and a timetable for gathering the data, instruments must be selected or constructed. Even if a qualitative approach is identified, the structure for data gathering and recording is crucial. If inappropriate (unreliable or invalid) instruments are selected, then the evaluation is worthless. The most comprehensive source of data on standardized tests is *The Eighth Mental Measurements Yearbook* (Buros, 1978) and the most comprehensive collection of other instruments used to evaluate gifted programs is *Sample Instruments for the Evaluation of Programs for the Gifted and Talented* (The Association for the Gifted, 1979).

How Should I Report My Findings?

The major considerations in reporting evaluation findings are to identify appropriate audiences and to present findings in a clear, non-technical and timely manner. Of course, it is also important that the results be presented in a non-threatening fashion. Be sure information is relevant and that there are no big "surprises." Incrementalism in program development is more likely to be positively received than is revolution.

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